

# Agudath Israel Rallies Community Support for Historic Tuition Relief Bill

At an emergency meeting yesterday, in the offices of Agudath Israel of America, yeshiva menaholim from all over New York State gathered with askonim and legislators to discuss strategies to rally support for Governor Andrew Cuomo's groundbreaking education tax credit bill.



Chaired by Rabbi Chaim Dovid Zwiebel, executive vice president of Agudath Israel, the meeting underscored the bill's special benefits for yeshiva parents and called for vigorous community support to ensure it passes the state legislature in

Albany next month.

"This is a historic development, a tremendous breakthrough that promises to be a game-changer," Rabbi Zwiebel told over 50 menaholim from all parts of the state. Noting the decades-long advocacy of Agudath Israel for tuition assistance dating back to when Rabbi Moshe Sherer z'l, led the struggle, he called the current initiative "a brief window of opportunity – just three and a half weeks – that will end June 17."

"The forces of opposition are already lining up," he cautioned, citing the teachers unions and liberal media organs that have slammed the bill. There must be a counter effort powerful enough to push the proposal to victory, he said.

Governor Cuomo introduced his proposal, called the Parental Choice in Education Act, two weeks ago. The bill's novel feature – a provision allowing qualifying parents to receive

tuition aid directly from the government as tax refunds – took many by surprise.

“We knew beforehand that the bill the governor was about to introduce was about tax credits but we didn’t know the details. We were surprised at how far-reaching it was,” Rabbi Zwiebel said.



The single largest component of the governor’s bill earmarks \$70 million as a tax credit for low-income parents. It awards \$500 per child for whom parents pay tuition. The parents receive the money as a tax refund even if they earn too little to pay taxes. For example, a family of five children will get back \$2,500 of their tuition payment when they file taxes.

In addition, the bill provides for \$50 million in tax credits for donations to scholarship funds benefiting low and middle income nonpublic school students.

In an atmosphere charged with the sense of a momentous opportunity for the entire yeshiva community, speakers urged all menahalim to mobilize their respective parent bodies in a powerful advocacy effort. They emphasized that the current bill would represent a critical step in governmental empowerment of parental choice in education. To squander this opportunity would carry negative repercussions for the Torah community far beyond the current initiative.



Assemblyman Dov Hikind explained the urgent need for pro-activism, stressing that a grassroots campaign in the form of a massive stream of telephone calls, emails and letters could tip the balance in Albany, producing the numbers needed to

pass the bill. He called on all yeshiva parents to make their voices heard. "Give your assemblymen the ammunition they need to fight for this bill," he exhorted those in the room.

Assemblyman Phil Goldfeder, joining the conference by phone, noted that a similar tax credit bill aimed at easing the tuition burden of needy families had failed in March due to being linked with the controversial Dream Act that would grant illegal and undocumented immigrants the same access to government scholarships as citizens.

"Coupling" the two pieces of legislation doomed the tax credit bill, he said. De-coupling them is imperative and will clear the way for mustering more support in Albany for this bill. "Our political representatives in Albany must get the clear message from us that the tuition relief bill stands alone," he advised.

Assemblyman Michael Simanowitz, also participating by phone, addressed the "militancy" of a vocal minority of 18-20 Assembly Democrats who oppose the bill. "We need our supporters in Albany to be more vigorous in their advocacy," he said. "The only way to counter the forceful opposition is for our allies to be even more passionate about supporting it."

The speakers noted the paramount role Yeshivas and parent populations can play in determining the fate of the bill by pouring energy into an advocacy campaign in Albany, where the Senate has already approved the bill and the Assembly is poised to vote on it in the coming weeks



“We’ve never seen such an opportunity before and we may never see it again,” urged Chaskel Bennet, member of Agudath Israel’s Board of Trustees. “There should be no mosad in Klal Yisroel and no parent who fails to act to take advantage of this Heaven sent opportunity.”

He reiterated the call for a massive email and phone campaign “minaar v’ad zakein, from across the religious spectrum,” to political representatives in Albany, demanding they come through for their constituents with passage of the historic bill.

(Photo Credits: Jack Velenski, En Vogue Studios)